

Priorities

by Nan Smith

Category: Lois and Clark
Language: English
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2000-05-11 08:00:00
Updated: 2000-05-11 08:00:00
Packaged: 2016-04-27 16:34:52
Rating: K+
Chapters: 1
Words: 18,985
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: As Lois figures out the important things in her life, a bomber threatens lives throughout the city.

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This story follows "Countdown" in the series of stories starting with "Dagger of the Mind". As always, the recognizable characters and settings in the story are the property of DC Comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions, etc, and no infringement of their copyright is intended. The story, however, is mine.

Nan Smith

Clark Kent glanced up from his desk at the sound of a long-suffering sigh. Lois was leaning back in her seat, both fists digging into her lower back, the expression on her face a combination of discomfort, fatigue and annoyance.

At nearly nine months of pregnancy, Lois had been sleeping badly for the last few weeks, a fact which contributed to her fatigue and to her short temper. Clark rose, moved quietly up behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders.

"Back hurting again, honey?"

"Make that 'still'," she said, but the smile she gave him over her shoulder belied the grumpy tone of her voice.

"We'll be off in another couple of hours," he said. "How about a back rub then? Think it might help?"

"That would be heaven," she admitted. "It's a date--"

The sound of the explosion that reached his ears wasn't confined to him alone. The whole newsroom shook, and Jimmy rushed to the window, trying to spot the source.

Clark leaned close to Lois's ear. "Cover for me." With a quick glance around to be certain all attention was focussed on the scene beyond the window, he made a hasty exit into the stairwell.

Lois watched him disappear, then struggled to her feet to hurry--or waddle, a part of her mind grumbled--toward the window.

"I can't see a thing," Ralph was saying. "Just a lot of smoke. Hey! Where'd Kent go?"

Ralph was getting too alert for their own good, Lois reflected, grimly. He had been after Perry to partner him with Clark for the last several weeks, ever since it had become apparent that Lois's mobility was becoming significantly impaired by her advancing pregnancy. Clark had spoken to Perry on the subject and their editor had, rather surprisingly, denied Ralph's request. Ralph had been watching Clark's comings and goings like a hawk ever since, often attempting to trail along in an effort to figure out his secret to the big scoops.

"Turn on the monitors!" Perry's voice rose above the hubbub.

Jimmy rushed to obey. Ralph turned persistently to Lois. "Where'd he go? He was by your desk a minute ago."

Lois raised her eyebrows. "That's why he wins awards, Ralph. He's on his way to the explosion, of course."

"Look at that!" Jimmy said.

A newscopter was apparently already on the scene, for the pictures rather obviously were coming from an aerial source. The scene showed the Metropolis Trade Tower with an enormous hole now gaping in one side, flames licking around the opening and a cloud of smoke pouring from it. A streak of red and blue whisked past as they watched, and into the smoke and flames. Almost at once, both began to diminish.

"Superman's there," Jimmy said. He was grabbing his camera as he spoke, and a moment later the door to the stairs swung shut behind him.

"Building Security received a threat about ten minutes before the bomb actually went off," Clark told Lois, later. "A few passersby got some cuts and bruises from flying debris, but, thank God, no one was seriously hurt. Superman helped evacuate some of the people trapped on the upper floors, and the emergency services did the rest."

"But what was the motive?" Lois wanted to know. "Why blow up the Trade Tower?"

"The Lunch Gourmet is across the street and halfway down the block," Clark said.

"Let me guess. The place was robbed."

"Bingo," Clark said. "After the excitement was over, the manager discovered the lunch receipts had been cleaned out."

"That's an awful lot of effort to go to, to commit a petty robbery."

"I know. It does seem a bit over the top," Clark agreed. "Still, we've run into crazier schemes."

"True, but usually there was an ulterior purpose," Lois said.

"How do we know there isn't?"

"I suppose." Lois reached for the phone. "I'm going to ask Bobby Bigmouth about it. Maybe he can find out something."

By the end of the day, Bobby still hadn't called back. Lois and Clark gathered their things and hurried to the second floor where the new day care center for the children of Planet employees was located. Four children, including CJ, were currently enrolled there, and Lois found that she greatly preferred the arrangement. She or Clark, sometimes both, were able to feed CJ at lunch, play with him, and make occasional visits during the day. Their little boy was growing fast, and neither of them was willing to miss important landmarks of his life.

Clark received him from Celia, the newest day care employee. Lois didn't miss the subtle once over the woman gave Clark, but had to forgive her. Celia was a grandmother with an obvious appreciation for the finer things in life, and in Lois's opinion that included her husband. CJ grinned at his father and whooped as Clark swung him into the air. At about ten months, CJ was walking around furniture, grasping for any and all support with his chubby hands. Lois guessed that any day, now, their baby would release his hold and walk; he was right on the verge of it.

Trish, one of the other women in the center, approached with CJ's stuffed dinosaur. "You don't want to forget this. He never lets it go when you're not here. I guess it's a sort of security blanket, huh?"

Lois accepted the toy. "He sleeps with it. Thanks, Trish."

"You're welcome. He's a real charmer, this one."

"Just like his dad," Lois said. "CJ, tell Trish bye-bye."

Obediently, CJ waved one hand, then planted a wet smack on Clark's cheek. He had recently learned to give kisses and, although sloppy, neither parent objected to them.

In the elevator, however, Lois looked at the dinosaur and fretted. "Clark, do you think CJ's insecure?"

"What?" Clark prevented the baby from removing his glasses. "Uh uh, pal, leave those right where they are. I need 'em. What do you mean 'insecure'?"

"Well, Trish says he uses his dinosaur like a security blanket. Do you suppose it's because he's insecure?"

"I doubt it, honey. He's a happy little boy. Don't lots of kids have security blankets and favorite toys?"

"I don't know. None of the books I've read agree about it."

Clark shifted his son to one arm and slipped the other around his wife, enjoying the feel of her rounded belly against his hand. "If you're really worried, why don't you talk to my mom? She can probably help better than I can, but personally I don't see anything to be concerned about. CJ seems pretty secure to me."

The elevator doors opened and they exited. Two women waiting for the elevator stood back to let them past. One of them said, "Hi, Lois! Haven't you had that baby, yet?"

"Not yet, Brenda. My due date isn't for two weeks." Only Clark heard the faint edge to her voice.

"Honestly," Lois said, a few minutes later as Clark was opening the door of the Jeep for her, "couldn't she *see* that I hadn't had the baby yet?" She maneuvered herself into the seat with some difficulty and dropped her shoulder bag onto the floor. "You know, I'm going to be awfully glad when I can actually see my feet again. I bet you will be, too." She pulled the safety belt across her lap. "I'll bet you're tired of a clumsy, fat wife who can't even bend over."

Clark was busy settling CJ into his car seat next to the new, and as yet empty one in the rear, but at that he winced. Lois had become extremely sensitive about her appearance this last month. He understood, to some extent. She had watched her formerly svelte figure change slowly over the past months; her center of balance had shifted, making her feel ungainly and fat, and now in the last few weeks her joints had started to slip. From the childbirth classes they knew that it was normal; her body was readying itself for the big event, but it didn't help Lois's feeling that her body wasn't hers to control anymore, and the hormonal changes were undoubtedly not helping.

He shut the rear door and slid into the driver's seat. "Lois," he said, "I'll be happy when the baby's born for a lot of reasons, including the fact that you're very uncomfortable right now. But not because of your looks. You're not fat; you're pregnant. And, you're beautiful."

She looked slightly reassured. "Even if I can't do all the things a good wife should?"

"Huh?" This was genuinely confusing.

"I mean, I can't cook, and I don't do all the things a wife's

supposed to do; what happens when CJ's second grade teacher wants cookies for the class party, or they want me to help with his art project, or--"

"Honey, CJ isn't even a year old yet. Why are you worrying about that?"

Lois sighed. "I was talking to Sonya Bradshaw, yesterday."

"Who...oh, Mrs. Bradshaw, our neighbor? What about her?"

"Well, you know her husband is a vice president at ZalTech, and she's a commercial artist."

"Is she?"

"Yes. And her youngest kid just started kindergarten this year. She volunteers for their field trips, and bakes for their parties; she does art projects at home, and did you know she even embroidered that gorgeous wall hanging in their living room? And she makes all her kids' clothes, and..."

"Lois," Clark said, "you're babbling again."

"But, I don't do any of those things!" Lois said. "She's so organized she has the time to do all this stuff, and all I can do is make Eggs a la Katie Banks, and--"

Clark suppressed the smile that tried to form on his lips. "Lois, I promise if CJ's second grade teacher wants cookies for the class party, I'll bake them. I didn't marry you for your cooking skills; I married you because you're you." He started the engine, waited for a break in the traffic and pulled out onto the street. "So just quit putting down the woman I love, okay?"

She looked down at her pregnant middle and then up at him. "I guess you think I'm being silly, huh?"

"Well, only a little." He neatly avoided a pedestrian with an obvious death wish and turned right at the intersection. "Lois, I'm not interested in Mrs. Bradshaw; I'm interested in you, whether or not you can make art projects out of dryer lint or something. That other stuff isn't important. I just wish I could make you see that."

She regarded him for a moment, then nodded hesitantly. "You do, when you're telling me these things," she said. "It's just that when you're not there and I see her looking so neat and professional, and being such a perfect wife and mother...She doesn't even slouch, did you know that? She worked her way through college as a model!"

"Lois, Mrs. Bradshaw has a major defect. She's not Lois Lane. Forget about her, okay?" He reached out and took her hand, eyes on the road. "I don't care about her accomplishments. I want to go home, make dinner, play with my son, cuddle up with my wife in front of the TV and relax. Maybe if we're lucky, no one will want Superman tonight." He gave her his best smile. "And if that works out, I'd like to demonstrate how beautiful and sexy I think you are."

"Really?"

"Really."

She drew a deep breath. "You're good for my ego, Clark."

"Superman doesn't lie. I'm only saying it because it's true."

Clark parked the Jeep in front of the brownstone and got out. As he was lifting CJ from his car seat, a sleek, black Mercedes pulled up to the curb behind them. A tall, slender woman with elegantly styled blond hair emerged from the driver's door and smiled at them as the other doors opened. Three children, all blond and well-dressed, scrambled out. The boy, a child of perhaps eight, carried a violin case in one hand and a folder of music sheets in the other.

"All right," their mother said, sweetly. "Arnold, I want you to go right to your room and practice. Your music teacher said she could tell you hadn't been giving it your best efforts since last week. Margot and Stacy, change those clothes immediately, then I want you to start your piano practice right away, Stacy."

"Yes, Mother," the two little girls chorused. The children sedately ascended the stairs of the house next door to the brownstone, and entered. The woman opened the trunk of her car and removed a bag from which protruded what appeared to Clark to be the end of a bolt of royal blue cloth.

Lois said, "Hello, Sonya."

"Hi, Lois." Sonya Bradshaw closed the trunk with one hand. "Are you just getting off work? Hello, Clark."

"Hello," Clark said. "Yes, we've just gotten away." He swung CJ into the crook of his left arm and turned to give his wife a hand up the flight of stairs. Lois had told him before that he was being overprotective, but the thought of her slipping on those steps in her condition was enough to give him chills.

"I imagine that awful explosion this afternoon kept you," Sonya said. "Do they have any idea who might have done such a thing?"

"Not yet," Lois said. "No one's claimed responsibility."

"It's really terrible," Sonya said. "I'm sure the police will unravel it, however."

"I'm sure," Lois said. "I see you found the color you were looking for." She nodded at the material in the other woman's hands.

"Yes, isn't it perfect?" Sonya held up the cloth. "I've gotten so tired of the dreadful color of that easy chair in Gary's den. He loves it, and won't let me get rid of it, so I decided to re-upholster it instead. At least this will improve its appearance, don't you think?"

"I'm sure it will. What does your husband think?"

"I haven't mentioned it, yet. I plan on surprising him. Tomorrow's my day off, and it should only take me a few hours to finish. I completely re-upholstered my living room set last year, you know. It's amazingly simple, once you know how."

Clark heard Lois mutter "I'll bet," under her breath, but Sonya obviously didn't. He intervened hastily.

"It was nice talking to you, Sonya, but CJ needs to be changed. We'll see you later."

"See what I mean, Clark?" Lois said, after the door closed behind them. "She does all these wonderful things. It makes me feel--"

"I wonder what her husband will think when he finds out she's re-upholstered his favorite chair without asking him?" Clark said. "It's probably his favorite because it's comfortable, after all."

Lois didn't answer, but she looked thoughtful as Clark set CJ down and went to find a clean diaper. She dropped onto the sofa and put her feet up.

Clark tickled CJ's stomach as he finished changing him. "There you go, pal. All done. Now, I'm going to rub your mommy's back, then we'll see about dinner for everybody. How about stir-fry, honey?"

"That sounds good," Lois said. "Just not hot and spicy this time. It's starting to give me heartburn."

"Don't worry," Clark assured her. He glanced at the telephone answering machine. "Looks like we've got a message. Why don't you see what it is while I get into some jeans?"

He vanished up the stairs and was back as she pushed the rewind switch. The machine clicked and whirred for a moment, then Bobby Bigmouth's voice emerged from the speaker.

"Hi, Lois. I wanted to let you know that I'm gonna be out of town for awhile, for my health. Thought maybe I'd visit my parents upstate. About what you asked earlier, there isn't much to tell you. I got a name--Al Tamberg. That's all. And watch your back. Bye." The machine clicked off.

"That's all?" Lois said. "What sort of tip is that? If he thinks I'm going to pay him for that kind of--"

"It sounds to me like Bobby's scared," Clark said.

Lois fell silent. "You're right, it does," she said after a moment. "Especially that part about getting out of town for awhile. Al Tamberg? Who's he? I've never heard of him."

"I haven't either. I guess we'll have to start asking around tomorrow. Now, about that backrub..."

Lois was setting the table while Clark added vegetables to the stir-fry and CJ played happily with a pan and wooden spoon in the middle of the kitchen floor. The stir-fry was beginning to smell very good, Lois thought, and heard her stomach growl; not an unusual occurrence these days. The nearly full term baby was big enough now to compress her stomach. Her meals had become small and frequent, and the heartburn was definitely more than a little annoying. One of the first things she intended to do after the new little Kent made his or her appearance was to have a full-sized Chinese meal. Clark had promised to get her one from Shanghai, and she fully intended to hold him to it.

Clark raised his head with "that look" and started to turn toward her.

"What is it, Superman?" Lois asked.

"Train derailment outside of town. I'd better get over there. Just stir this occasionally so it doesn't burn and take it off in four minutes, okay? I'll be back as soon as I can."

"All right." She gave him a hasty peck on the cheek and stood back to give him room. A swish of wind, and he stood there in the Suit; then he was gone. Lois bent over the food and stirred it cautiously.

"Here's hoping Daddy gets back pretty quick," she told CJ. "I don't want to poison us. Of course, Daddy regularly eats bombs and things, so I guess I couldn't do that to him, but the first time you try something I fix--besides baby food, that is, and that comes out of a jar--you'll know why he does all the cooking."

CJ responded with an unintelligible babble, and Lois stirred the food again. "I wonder if this is done--has it been four minutes, yet?"

The doorbell rang. Quickly, Lois gave the food another stir, then hurried to the front door. A small, flat package lay beneath the mail slot and she bent to pick it up.

It was addressed to Lois Lane, but there was no return address, and the printing was in magic marker. That was odd. Lois stared at it for along moment. Who would have sent her a package? She turned it over in her hands, looking for any other identifying mark, and as she did so, Bobby's warning came to mind: "Watch your back." What had he meant by that?

Well, it was probably harmless, but she would wait for Clark to come back and let him x-ray it first. It couldn't hurt.

She set the package on a shelf, well out of CJ's grasp, and started back toward the kitchen. As she did so the sound of some small, breakable item striking the floor reached her ears.

The sound came from the den. With a slight sinking feeling, she hurried in that direction, and discovered that her suspicions were correct. CJ was sitting on the small throw rug, and beside him on the wood floor lay the remains of the bud vase her mother had given her. The doily that had covered the small side table was also on the floor, where the little boy had apparently dragged it.

Lois shook her head and sighed. "You know, sweetheart, you're definitely a superbaby. You move almost as fast as your dad." Quickly, she removed CJ from the rug and checked him over for cuts. Finding none, she carried him back to the living room and set him in his playpen, then went for the broom to sweep up the broken glass.

It was while she was getting awkwardly down on her knees to whisk the glass into the dustpan that the smoke alarm went off.

"The stir-fry!" Lois dropped the broom, hauled herself to her feet and hurried into the kitchen. The room was full of smoke and the food in the pan was blazing. Lois seized the skillet lid and dropped it gingerly on top of the pan to put out the flames, turned off the burner, then stared disconsolately at the ruins of their dinner, resisting the urge to burst into tears. Couldn't she do *anything* right?

A gust of air announced her husband's arrival, and Clark cleared the room of smoke in a single breath. "What happened?"

She explained the sequence of events, and he zeroed in at once on the most important point. "Where is this package?"

"On the shelf over there. I didn't want it anywhere CJ could reach it. I'll get it."

"It was smart of you not to open it," Clark said as she handed him the small, square object. "Let's see..." He squinted at the package, and Lois saw his expression become grim. "I'm taking this to Henderson. Keep the doors locked."

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you when I get back." He kissed her quickly and was gone.

Lois walked slowly back into the den to clean up the broken glass. This evening was not going exactly as planned, that was certain.

As she was dumping the debris into the trash, the doorbell rang.

Lois walked to the door and carefully peered through the peephole. Sonya Bradshaw stood there, her blond hair gleaming in the light of the porch lamp. Lois opened the door.

"Sonya?"

"Lois, you're an investigative reporter. Something arrived through my mail slot a little while ago, and I need to talk to someone who knows about this kind of thing. May I come in?"

Lois stood back. "Come in."

"This was delivered to the Kents?" Henderson examined the package Superman handed him.

"Yes. Lois found it, but she called me rather than opening it."

Henderson shook his head. "I'll never understand how she does it. The Kents aren't the only ones who got one of these in the last couple of days, but theirs is the only unopened one." He punched a button on his intercom. "Hannigan, get in here!"

"Other people have gotten them?"

Henderson nodded. "The first one was delivered day before yesterday."

When Clark arrived at 348 Hyperion Ave. some twenty minutes later, the first thing of which he became aware was the fact that Lois had a visitor. Sonya Bradshaw, their neighbor, was sitting on the sofa, a package similar to the one he had just delivered to Inspector Henderson lying open on the coffee table in front of her. Lois was seated in the smaller armchair with CJ in her lap.

"Clark, just after you left, Sonya brought over a package like the one we got," Lois began, as he walked into the room. "Tell him about it, Sonya."

The woman held up the contents. "It was addressed to Gary, but since he wasn't home I opened it. I don't understand this."

Clark walked forward and removed the piece of cardboard from her hands. The word "BOOM", printed in black, magic marker stood out in sharp contrast to the white cardboard.

"I met Superman on the way," he told Lois. "He took our package on to the police for us. He told me that two other people received these in the last couple of days. One was the man who's office in the Trade Tower was blown up today. The other was a business manager for Morris Chemicals." He turned to Sonya, holding the note carefully by one corner. "You should call the police right away, Sonya. This is a threat to your husband that needs to be taken seriously."

Sonya looked hesitant. "Are you sure, Clark? I mean, if there's real danger, I suppose I probably should, but how will it look to have a police car sitting in our driveway? What will the neighbors think?"

"Does it matter?" Lois asked. "Sonya, a man who received one of these notes was very nearly killed today. Next time it could be your husband!"

Sonya hesitated. "I guess so. I suppose I should. I guess I could ask them to send an unmarked car."

Clark resisted the urge to shake his head. "If you like I'll take it to them for you. Then, if they want to talk to you, they can call you or Gary."

"Would you?" Sonya looked relieved. "I know it's silly, but I don't really want to..."

"Sure." Clark reached for the phone. "Just let me give Henderson a call."

A few minutes later, after Sonya had left, Lois went to the freezer, intending to remove two TV dinners. Clark's voice stopped her.

"I'll drop this thing off with Henderson, then fly over to Italy and pick us up something, all right? Why don't you just sit down, put your feet up and relax?"

"Are you sure, Clark?"

He put his arms around her from behind. "Of course I am. Nothing is too good for the mother of my baby. Besides, things have been just a little strange, tonight."

"Kent, has anyone ever told you that you're really good at understatements?"

Some four hours later, Lois was getting awkwardly into bed. She could hear Clark brushing his teeth in the bathroom, and the sounds of CJ snuffling softly as he slept in his room across the hall. Slowly, she arranged the pillows for maximum support and reached for the magazine on her nightstand.

The water shut off in the bathroom and a moment later Clark slid into the bed. "Man, what an evening! Are you okay, honey?"

"I guess so. What do you suppose is going on, Clark?"

He didn't pretend to misunderstand her. "I don't know. If we can find the 'Al' Bobby mentioned, maybe we can find out. What I'd like to know is how that robbery fits into this."

"Maybe it doesn't. Maybe somebody just saw an opportunity and took it."

"That's possible. But what do we, Gary Bradshaw, a business executive for Morris Chemicals, and another one from ZalTech have in common? I never heard of most of these people before."

"I don't know. I guess we're in for some research tomorrow. Or Jimmy is." She broke off as the phone rang. "Who'd be calling at this hour?"

"Good question." Clark reached for the phone. "Hello?" He listened for a moment. "Just a minute, Alice, slow down. You say that you came back to Perry's after a date and there was a package in his mailbox?"

Lois pushed herself up. "Is that Alice White?"

He nodded. "Have you opened it?" Again he listened. "Okay, listen, I want you to call Inspector Henderson at Police Headquarters. If he's not in, leave him a message. You were right to call. Good. No problem at all. 'Bye."

"Perry got one, too?" Lois asked as he hung up.

Clark looked grim. "Yes. 'Boom'. Perry thought it was a prank and was just going to throw it away, but Alice stuck it in her purse."

"Good for her. Should we talk to Perry, do you think?"

"She's calling the police," Clark said, "but I think we should, tomorrow. Whatever's happening is serious, that's for sure..."

Lois pulled the silver Jeep into a parking space a short distance from the Daily Planet. Clark glanced out the window doubtfully. A slow drizzle was drifting down this morning from an overcast sky, and a light but steady breeze spattered tiny drops against the windshield. All in all, the prospect was not particularly inviting.

"Are you sure you don't want to park in the underground lot this morning, Lois?" he asked her. "We're going to get a little wet."

She shook her head with determination. "Not on your life. The last time we parked there, Mayor Burns tried to blow up the Jeep."

"Lois, Madeline Burns is in prison, upstate. I don't think it's likely that..."

"Forget it. That place gives me the creeps. You can dry us out with your heat vision once we're in the elevator." She opened her door. At once the car beeped, reminding her that she had forgotten to remove her keys from the ignition. Clark clapped his hands over his ears.

"Ow!"

"Oops." Lois recovered her keys. "Sorry."

Clark grimaced, removing his hands. "We've got to get that thing replaced."

"Why? It sounds okay to me."

He shook his head. "Trust me, it's not. Something's happened to it. It's developed the most annoying, subsonic grating noise I ever heard. Like somebody scratching his fingernails on a chalkboard. I first noticed it day before yesterday. It's got to go before it deafens me."

"How will we explain it?" she objected. "Nobody's going to hear it but Superman."

Clark pulled CJ from his car seat and closed the rear door. "Then we'll tell them Superman said it sounded like something was wrong with it."

"I think I'll let you do it," Lois said. "Come on, let's hurry!"

"So, you got one, too?" Perry was frowning thoughtfully as Lois and Clark finished their description of the events of the previous evening.

"Yeah. So did our neighbor and two other business executives." Lois said. "One of them was the guy whose office in the Trade Tower blew up yesterday."

"Huh! Sounds like Metropolis's got some kind o' nutcase with a grudge. Did Superman say if there'd been any demands or anything?"

Clark shook his head. "Just the notes."

Perry grunted. "Great shades of Elvis, what's the world comin' to? Okay, thanks for the warning. I'll watch my step. Now, what have you two got goin' this morning?"

"Well, we're still trying to get hold of yesterday's victim," Lois said. "His name is Raul Burma. He works for ZalTech. He's some kind of company liason with the Trade Association or something, with an office in the Trade Tower. So far we haven't had much luck, but we'll keep trying. And Jimmy's trying to locate this Al Tamberg for us. If we could talk to him, he might be able to help."

An hour later, Clark set down his phone with exaggerated care. "Let's see," he said to Lois. "I've spoken to three different secretaries and two public relations spokespersons, and have been sitting on hold for a total of fifty-two minutes. I was just switched back to the first guy again. Now, if I was the suspicious sort, I'd think I was being given the runaround."

Lois put down her phone as well. "I think," she said, "that their music selection should be reported to the Department of Public Health. It's guaranteed to give you a raging headache. I..." She broke off as she saw him lift his head in a familiar way. "Go."

Clark rose and strode quickly toward the ramp. Perry, coming across the newsroom toward Lois's desk, didn't even glance around as he went past, but Ralph jumped to his feet.

"Hey, Kent! Wait up!"

Clark never slowed his stride. Ralph half-sprinted after him. "Kent, wait! Oops!"

"Judas Priest, Ralph!" Perry jumped back to avoid the man as he sprawled full length on the floor. "Watch where you put your feet!"

Lois frowned at the sight of Ralph scrambling awkwardly upright. Had she really seen Perry stick out a foot as he went past? Clark had vanished during the confusion, she noted. Nah, Perry wouldn't have

done that. It must have been her imagination.

She turned as the monitors came on suddenly, to show the Lexor Hotel and a muscular figure in red and blue as it zipped through the demolished wall of the Twentieth Floor, where the Honeymoon Suite had once been.

Perry was standing beside her as she looked back. He nodded at the monitors. "Think that's our boy again?"

"Could be," Lois said. "It would be an awful coincidence to have two bombers in the city at the same time."

"Building Security got a call about ten minutes before the explosion, again," Clark was saying, two hours later. "A few guests were hurt, but nobody was killed."

"That's kind of strange," Lois said. "If they first threaten somebody, why would they warn them just before the explosion? Whoever is doing this probably isn't targeting the buildings, so why warn the victims? It kind of negates the whole point. If our bomber is just trying to scare people, he's sure picked a complicated way to do it."

"I know what you mean. The people in the Honeymoon Suite were John Grandle, the guy who got the second note, and his new wife. He and his bride were on the first day of their honeymoon, and they got out before the bomb went off, fortunately. Oh, and Flanagan's Irish Pizza Shoppe, just down the block, was cleaned out at the same time."

"Weird," Lois said. "None of it seems to make much sense. I just can't see someone going to that much effort to rob a pizza parlor."

"Me, either."

"Uh, guys?" Jimmy hurried up to them, several sheets of computer printout trailing from one hand. "I think I've got your guy. Al Tamberg? He works for Metropolis Total Landscape Designs. They're a firm that gets a lot of contracts from the City. He's a gardener."

The grounds of the headquarters of the Metropolis Police Department were hardly extensive, but the small area was very nicely landscaped, Lois noticed for the first time. The man carefully trimming the hedges that lined the walls on both sides of the front steps looked more as if he should have been an athlete. He was tall and sandy-haired, with a pleasant expression and brilliant, blue eyes that were, at the moment, focussed firmly on his job. His shoulders were broad and his arms muscular. The exertions of his work must be keeping him warm, she thought, for, although the drizzle of this morning no longer fell, the day was still grey and chilly.

He looked up finally and wiped sweat from his forehead. "Can I help you, or are you just watching?" He gave Lois a smile that seemed

somehow familiar. Surely she had met this man before, but she couldn't place the occasion.

"Actually, we were hoping we could talk to you," Clark said. "This is Lois Lane and I'm Clark Kent. We're reporters from the Daily Planet."

"You want to talk to me?" The man looked slightly puzzled. "Okay, if you don't mind if I work while you talk. I'm on a tight schedule."

"Not a problem," Clark said. "We were given your name. I'm sure you've heard about the explosion at the Trade Tower yesterday, and the one at the Lexor Hotel today."

Al Tamberg's expression turned wary. "Yes," he admitted. "Why?"

"Mr. Tamberg," Lois said, "We don't mean to imply anything, but we were told you might have some idea about who might be behind it. Do you?"

The man carefully trimmed the side of the hedge before he said anything, then he glanced back at the two reporters. "You believe in coming to the point, don't you Ms. Lane?"

"You mean you do know something?" Lois asked.

"I'm not sure." Tamberg lopped off an errant branch. "Maybe. Tell me, Ms. Lane, do you recognize me?"

"You look familiar, but I can't place you. I'm sorry."

"I suppose that's reasonable. It's been seven years, and it wasn't really me." The man smiled slightly. "I have a twin brother, Ms. Lane. Do you remember the name William Tamberg?"

"William...Ohmigod. William Tamberg!"

Tamberg smiled ironically. "I see you do. He was released from prison six months ago, you know. His sentence was reduced because of exemplary behavior."

"Who is William Tamberg?" Clark asked.

"William Tamberg was a chemist who worked for LexChem seven years ago," Lois said. "He was fired and blew up the lab in revenge. The coworker whom he apparently blamed for his firing was accidentally killed in the explosion. I reported on it...it was actually my investigation that caused suspicion to fall on him."

Tamberg was nodding. "That was it. William always had a problem with authority figures. He and Dad never got along. They constantly fought. While he was in college, he hated most of his professors. I guess, when he was fired from his job at LexChem he sort of snapped. I knew there was going to be trouble; he'd made threats, but I never thought he'd act on any of them the way he did. You actually did him a favor, Ms. Lane, and I'll always be grateful to you for it. Because of you he was caught before he did any more damage, and given the

help he needed."

"So, what happened?" Lois asked.

"He pleaded temporary insanity," Al said. "You knew that, I'm sure. He swore to me that he hadn't intended to kill anyone, and I believe him. He went in for intensive counseling while he was at the prison; he wanted to learn better methods of controlling his anger. His prison record was close to perfect, and he was given time off for his good behavior, so they released him late last September. He's behaved himself perfectly ever since, Ms. Lane."

"How about the bombings?" Lois asked.

Tamberg shook his head. "I don't know. William was doing so well. I can't believe he's behind these horrible things, but it's possible there's someone copying his techniques, or perhaps someone using his knowledge without him knowing about it. I was speaking with him the other day, and he mentioned he'd met some new friends who were helping him to find a job, but he didn't say much about them, and I didn't ask. I really don't believe William would backslide and try to hurt anyone."

Clark produced a card from his pocket. "If you find out anything about this, could you give us a call? No one has been killed yet, but if your brother is somehow involved we want to stop him before it gets to that point."

Tamberg nodded and took the card. "Of course, Mr. Kent. I'm sorry I couldn't be of any more assistance. Let me give you his address,. Maybe if you talk to him in person it will be more useful."

"Well, that was interesting," Clark said, as they climbed back into the Jeep, leaving Al Tamberg to his pruning.

"Very." Lois started the engine. "I didn't go into everything that actually happened in that case, Clark. After Tamberg blew up the lab where he worked, he also planted bombs in the offices of a senior chemist, one of the company managers and a junior vice president as well."

"Sounds like he was branching out," Clark said.

"He'd appealed his case all the way up and was turned down. He blamed them all for the ruin of his career, I guess. The bombs were found before they went off." She grinned. "*I* found them, actually. Anyway, I wrote the story, and it led the police to him. He blamed Perry and me for his arrest, but he wasn't very happy with Henderson, either. Henderson was the detective who arrested him. I think we better call Jimmy and see if he can track down who Burma, Grandle and Gary Bradshaw used to work for. Wouldn't it be an interesting coincidence if they'd worked for LexChem?"

William Tamberg apparently rented an attic apartment in a private home, they discovered upon tracking down his address. He was at work, his landlady informed them, and she refused to allow them to inspect his room without a warrant. They asked her to inform him of their

visit, and promised to return later. While Lois was talking to the woman, Clark took the opportunity to scan the man's place with his x-ray vision, but found no sign of bomb-making materials.

"I thought Al said his brother was looking for a job," Lois remarked, as they walked back to the Jeep.

"He did. I suppose he could have been hired at something since the last time they talked, though," Clark said.

"I suppose." Lois rubbed her back with one hand. "We don't *know* William Tamberg is the one who planted those bombs. Al did say he's afraid somebody else might be copying him."

"It's possible, but Tamberg is our only lead right now. If someone *is* copying him, or using his expertise, they may have some contact with him." Clark opened the door for her. "Is your back still bothering you?"

"Some. You can rub it for me, later. Let's get back to the office and see if Jimmy has anything more for us."

When they arrived in the newsroom a short time later Jimmy was waiting for them. He started speaking almost before they had reached the main floor. "You've really got something this time! I looked up the employment records of the three people you wanted, and guess what!"

"They were all employed by LexChem," Lois said.

Jimmy looked disappointed. "How did you know?"

"Call it a pretty good hunch," Clark said.

"You mean you know who the bomber is?"

"Maybe," Lois said. "Jimmy, I want you to dig up every bit of information for me that you can find on a William Tamberg. He was in prison upstate until about six months ago, and before that he worked for LexChem. That's all I can tell you, but it should get you started."

"That's more than I usually start with. Okay, here's the stuff on the first three. I'll let you know when I find anything."

"Lois! Clark!" Perry emerged from his office. "I want the two of you to get over to City Hall! Mayor Thompkins is going to be giving a press conference on the bombings in about forty-five minutes."

"On it, Chief." Clark gave Lois a hand as they started back up the ramp. "Are you okay, honey?" he asked, softly.

"Yeah. Just tired." She brushed absently at the front of her maternity top. "Good thing this material is brown. We've been rushing around so much today that I haven't even had time to try to get the coffee stain out of it, yet."

Clark grinned sympathetically. That had happened within minutes of their arrival this morning.

"Well, at least you can sit down on the way over." he said. Personally, he was glad that her own version of maternity leave started tomorrow. Trying to get Lois to take time off was about as easy as pulling teeth, but her fatigue in these last few weeks was beginning to get even her down. Between them, he and Perry had managed to convince her to take half a day off each day, starting tomorrow, until the baby was born. Even though they couldn't know the actual length of a half-Kryptonian gestation, Dr. Klein was in no doubt of the fact that it could not be much longer. All the signs were there, he'd told them. It could be any time, now. Clark had been keeping a surreptitious eye on her for the last week, while trying not to seem as if he was hovering. Lois wouldn't have appreciated that at all.

His Honor, Lois concluded, after fifteen minutes of hearing the mayor speak, didn't have any idea what was actually going on. After hearing his pronouncements about FBI special units, Superman's invaluable assistance and the imminence of an arrest, Lois concluded that the city leaders had simply felt the need to reassure the citizens before panic broke out. One look at the Chief of Police standing near the podium, and his completely blank expression, convinced her of that. Chief Harrelson wasn't much of an actor. Inspector Henderson looked frankly bored.

"He doesn't have a clue," she whispered to Clark, who was sitting beside her with such an expression of earnest fascination on his face that it made her want to giggle. A corner of his mouth twitched, but he didn't answer. Mayor Thompkins had gotten as far as calling for questions when the sound and vibrations of an explosion nearby brought an abrupt end to the proceedings.

"Where is it?" Lois whispered.

"Police Headquarters," he replied, getting to his feet.

"Go. Be careful."

Other journalists were rushing toward the exit as well, and in the confusion no one noticed the sudden gust of air as Superman departed hastily for the disaster. Lois struggled to her feet and made her way through the mob of excited people toward the double doors at the rear of the big room.

Inspector Henderson's office had been the target this time, Clark discovered in short order when he arrived at the scene. The outer wall of the building had been blown inward, and smoke was pouring from the opening.

The first thing on the agenda was to extinguish the flames that were licking at the furnishings, the next to be certain there was no one inside. Very shortly, he was engaged in helping police officers with the rescue efforts.

Fortunately, Henderson had been at the mayor's unscheduled press conference or he would very probably have been killed, Clark thought, grimly, as he carried a young officer from the building. His x-ray

vision had already determined that the man's leg was broken, but moving him had seemed preferable to leaving him in the hallway with pieces of ceiling threatening to collapse over his head. He delivered his burden to one of the teams of paramedics who were already on the scene and dove back into the building once more. He could hear the voices of several more men and women calling for assistance, and fanned his x-ray vision around, attempting to locate them. A wooden beam came loose suddenly from above, and he was barely in time to prevent it striking a firefighter who had entered ahead of him. He pointed, holding the beam over their heads with one hand. "There's a woman in there, under a desk. She seems to have a broken ankle."

"Thanks, Superman." Cautiously, the man opened the indicated door and after a quick check to be sure it was relatively safe, vanished inside.

Lois arrived on the scene of the bombing in time to see her husband emerge from the building with a policewoman in his arms. Standing back behind the cordoned-off area with the rest of the Metropolis Press Corps and the crowd of rubbernecks, she felt a surge of anger at the cowardly behavior of their bomber. Whatever his motives, his chosen method of revenge was indiscriminate; others besides his target were caught in the circle of destruction--not that she wanted to see his real targets hurt, either. She saw Inspector Henderson shoving his way through the crowd. His mouth was moving as if he was shouting something, but she couldn't hear it over the furor of fire sirens, police whistles, screams, and the racket being produced by the onlookers, themselves.

"Hey, Lane! Where's Kent?"

She turned at the familiar and unwelcome voice in her ear. Ralph stood there, with Jimmy behind him. The expression on the young photographer's face was openly apologetic.

"I don't know," she said. "We got separated. I think he's somewhere over there." She pointed toward a section of the crowd where the bodies seemed even more densely jammed together than where they were standing, then began to push her way toward the edge of the spectators. Standing in this mob was getting her nowhere, especially considering the fact that she was shorter than many of the people ahead of her.

Ralph followed her, Jimmy in tow, and she glanced at him in irritation. Well, it was better to have him tagging after her than after Clark, she reasoned. They were going to have to figure out a way to discourage him, however. Clark couldn't afford to have the man trying to follow him when he needed to go out and be Superman while she was on maternity leave, and nothing they had done so far seemed to have had any effect.

She was focussing so hard on Ralph as she emerged from the edge of the crowd that she almost ran into the man who stood staring over the heads of the onlookers at the ruins of MPD Headquarters. "Oops, sorry..." She nearly did a double take. "Mr. Tamberg?"

He spun at the sound of her voice, and for an instant their eyes

locked. Then, with a muffled curse, he shoved her roughly aside and ran.

Lois pushed herself up on her hands and knees. Jimmy was trying to lift her to her feet, the freckles on his face standing out in stark contrast to the unusual pallor of his skin. "Lois, are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"Go after him!" She struggled awkwardly to get up. "Hurry!"

"Lois..."

"Hurry! Find out where he goes!"

After a second doubtful look at her, Jimmy turned and ran after the fugitive. Ralph stared at her, mouth open until she shocked him out of his apparent trance. "Ralph, you can at least help me up!"

"Huh? Oh." Ralph gave her a hand up. "What was that all about?"

Lois didn't answer. A blur of red and blue had suddenly materialized beside her. Superman's face was whiter than Jimmy's had been. "Lois! Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"What happened? Did you fall?"

"Some guy pushed her down," Ralph said, helpfully. "Then he took off running."

"Who was it?" The expression on Superman's face did not bode well for the offender.

"I thought it was Al Tamberg," Lois said. "But when he saw me he seemed to panic, and then he ran off." Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jimmy jogging toward them. "I sent Jimmy after him, but I guess he got away."

Jimmy arrived beside them a moment later. "Sorry, Lois. He jumped into a car and drove off before I could even get close enough to see the license plate. All I could see was the color. It was white." He glanced at Superman. "The guy knocked her down, Superman."

"I'm fine," Lois said again. "My blouse is never going to be the same, though." She wiped futilely at a wide, black stain that now adorned the left, lower quadrant of the garment. "How's the situation over there?" She glanced at the remains of the police station.

Superman glanced in the same direction and grimaced. "Everyone's out, and no one was killed, but there's a lot of injured officers. Are you sure you're all right, Lois? If you need to see your doctor..."

"Superman, you're worse than Clark. If you could just find him for me..."

"I can take you to him, if you like."

Clark was really worried, she thought. Heaven preserve her from overprotective males! She decided to take pity on him. "All right, Superman." She reached into her purse and produced the Jeep's keys. "Jimmy, can you drive this back to the Planet for me?"

"Sure, Lois." Jimmy accepted the keys. "I'll be careful with it, I promise."

"You better be." She winked at him to take the sting from her words as Superman lifted her carefully in his arms, and an instant later they were airborne.

"I think I can reassure you that the fall didn't do any damage, Clark." Dr. Klein glanced uncomfortably at Lois, who glowered balefully at both men. "I'm as certain as I can be without attaching her to a monitor."

"Do you mind talking as if I was here?" Lois demanded. "I'm not a child!"

"Sorry." Dr. Klein winced visibly. "But I think you should take it easy for the rest of the day, Lois. Try to avoid any more insults to your body for twenty-four hours at least. We've gotten this far; I'd rather you didn't decide to go into labor prematurely."

Clark looked at her, and the expression on his face was that of a man about to embark upon a forlorn hope. "Lois, I think..."

"Never mind, Clark," Lois said. "If Dr. Klein says I need to do this for the baby's safety then I'll do it." She had to work to keep her face straight at the expressions on the faces of the two men. "You don't honestly think I'm so stupid as to deliberately do anything to risk this baby, do you?"

Clark visibly relaxed. "No, not really," he said. "But sometimes what you think is risky and what other people think is risky are two different things."

"Who says Superman never sticks his foot in his mouth," Lois said, ironically. "But even before I met Superman, I took risks for myself that I would never let someone else take. And I've cut back on that a lot ever since we got CJ, Clark, and you know it."

"Yeah, I do." He had the grace to look sheepish. "Sorry, Lois. I guess I get a bit overprotective at times, but when I saw you on the ground back there at the Police Department...well, I was scared!"

"I know." She softened slightly. "It's all right, Clark. Look, why don't you take me home, and I'll finish my other work there. I can telecommute for the rest of the day. It's not that long, anyway."

"No heavy lifting," Dr. Klein said. "In fact, it would be just as well if you didn't even lift CJ until tomorrow."

"Don't worry about that," Clark said. "I'll bring CJ home with me after work. You can have the afternoon completely free to do what you like, all right, Lois?"

She rolled her eyes, but nodded. "Fine, Mother, dear."

Clark grinned. "Can I give you a lift, ma'am?"

Superman set Lois gently down just inside their bedroom window. "Home, sweet home. I'm going to get a shower and a clean uniform while I've got the chance."

"Good idea." She surveyed the smudged and soot-smeared Suit clinically. "I'll soak it in that enzyme stuff your mom gave me and see if I can get those stains out. I think I'll try it on my shirt, too." She glanced down at the extremely dirty maternity top which had been so clean and stylish this morning. "I'd hate to think I only got to wear this once before I threw it away."

He grinned and vanished into the bathroom in a blur. She heard the shower come on, and a moment later he was emerging, a short towel wrapped around his hips. Another blur, and he was dressed in a second Suit.

"There are definitely disadvantages to that super speed stuff," Lois said.

"Sorry, honey," he said, contritely. "I'll make it up to you tonight, but right now I need to get over to see Henderson. I'm going to tell him about Tamberg and what we've found out. By the way, I've been meaning to ask, but I got distracted. Do you think that was really Al Tamberg that you saw?"

"I thought so, at first," Lois said slowly, "but now I think it must have been William. They're twins, remember."

"How could I forget? Well, I'm going to give Henderson everything we've got, anyhow. If Tamberg's innocent, they'll find out pretty quickly."

"Yeah. A news story's one thing, but if this keeps up, sooner or later he's going to kill somebody." She kissed him thoroughly. "Go. Just don't forget your promise about tonight."

"Not a chance." He kissed her again, and was gone.

Slowly, Lois removed her soiled clothing and changed into an older, but clean outfit, then took her shirt and Clark's Suit downstairs to the kitchen. Miraculously, the cape seemed to have escaped anything but the most minor of stains, and she simply dropped it into the hamper, but the Suit itself needed major treatment if it was ever to be worn again.

She filled the sink with lukewarm water, according to the instructions on the box, threw in both his and her own items of clothing, and left them to soak while she retired to the den with her notes about the disaster at Police Headquarters this afternoon, and the ones Clark had hastily written up for her while she was being

checked by Dr. Klein. She had already phoned in the initial story, but this one was going to be more detailed and in-depth. Quickly, she switched on the computer and got down to business.

Much later, she transmitted it to Perry at the Planet with a feeling of accomplishment and stood up, glancing at her watch. It was past five. Something must be holding Clark up, she thought. Superman might have been needed again.

Slowly, she stretched, then wandered back into the living room to turn on the television. A local channel informed her within minutes what the delay had been. The picture that came on was of Superman hauling a compact car out of a huge sinkhole which had apparently developed on a street in the downtown business district. It figured, she thought, watching the scene and admiring the way the muscles bulged in his thighs as he set the vehicle down and pulled open the front door to free the driver. You've got it bad, Lane, she told herself, happily. What a hunk, and he was all hers.

She watched until the report finished and a commercial took its place, then went into the kitchen. The Suit and her maternity top were still soaking in the sink, so she pulled out the old toothbrush she used for the purpose and set to work on the stains in the cloth.

They came out more easily than she had expected--this enzyme cleaner Martha had given her worked like magic. She was just rinsing the Suit when someone hammered on the kitchen door.

A glance out the window told her that it was Sonya Bradshaw, and that she was openly upset. Lois snatched up the Suit. She couldn't let Sonya see that!

Quickly, she wrung it out and bundled it up into a tight roll, then seized her wet maternity shirt and wrapped it snugly around the Suit. There, that should do it.

"Lois?" Sonya called.

"Just a minute, Sonya!" Knowing her observant neighbor, she'd better not leave it out here. With a sudden flash of inspiration, she crammed the bundle into a plastic bag and thrust it into the freezer, out of sight, then smoothed her slightly ruffled hair, took a deep breath and opened the door. "Hi."

"Men!" Sonya exploded, as she stalked in the door. "They're pigs!"

"What happened?" Lois asked, a little taken aback. Sonya Bradshaw's face was uncharacteristically flushed, and two or three small locks of hair had come loose from her usually perfect coiffure.

"After all the work I went to to re-upholster that horrible chair of Gary's, he told me he didn't like it!" Sonya stomped across the kitchen and threw herself into a kitchen chair. "He had the nerve to tell me he wanted it back the way it was! We just had a horrible fight, and he left!"

"Where did he go?" Lois asked, cautiously.

"Probably the nearest bar!" Sonya burst into tears. "What does it matter, anyway? He almost never comes home. He's out at the office to all hours of the night; we haven't had dinner together in nearly three weeks! Tell me, Lois, does Clark do that to you?"

"No," Lois said. "Once in a while he has to be out late, but most of the time he does his best to be here in the evening."

"Well, you're lucky! Mine is so focussed on his career that he hasn't got time for his family anymore!"

"Let me make you some tea," Lois suggested. That seemed safe. Playing the role of marriage counselor wasn't exactly how she had envisioned spending her time off this afternoon.

"Thanks." Sonya stared at her clenched hands on the kitchen table. "After all the trouble I've taken to give him a nice home and he doesn't appreciate it one bit!"

Maybe, Lois considered, appearances were deceiving after all. Of course, Clark had suggested that Gary Bradshaw might not like the unsolicited renovation of his favorite chair. She put the teakettle on to boil and got out the teacups while listening to Sonya detail Gary's various imperfections and misdeeds, giving an occasional nod or vague, encouraging murmur. By the time the tea was ready, Sonya was working on the first year of their marriage and the horrible case of poison ivy she had gotten on their first and last camping trip, and the general stupidity of males in general who, when they had a perfectly comfortable home, chose to go out into the woods with the ants and mosquitoes and poison ivy and sleep on the ground, all so they could spend a day standing up to their hips in a stream trying to catch a fish that she had absolutely no intention of cleaning or cooking! After all, what were supermarkets for...? She'd put a stop to those camping trips once and for all. Gary's friends could just go without him from then on...

The sound of a key in the front door lock brought the monologue to a long-awaited end. Clark called, "Lois! I'm home!"

"I'm in the kitchen, Clark," she answered. A moment later, her husband appeared in the doorway, CJ on his hip.

"Hi, honey." He set the baby on the floor and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Hello, Sonya. How are you, today?"

"Fine," she said, flatly. "I'd better get back, Lois. It was nice talking to you."

After Sonya had left, Clark looked questioningly at Lois. "What was that all about?"

"Sonya and Gary had a fight." Lois shook her head. "He's mad because she redid his chair and she's mad because he's ungrateful. I feel sorry for their kids."

"Me, too." Clark walked forward and put his arms around her. "Come here."

Several long kisses later, Clark said, "I'm glad you're my wife."

"I'm glad you're my husband."

CJ chose that moment to pull himself up on his father's trouser leg. Clark reached down and lifted him up on a level with the adults. "Hey there, pal, get your own girl!"

CJ babbled a stream of unintelligible syllables at him and Clark grinned. "You don't say. Well, Mommy's going to sit down over there while Daddy gets dinner for everybody. Want a couple of crackers in the meantime?"

While he put together the dinner, and CJ scattered cracker crumbs around the kitchen floor, Clark filled her in on the happenings of the afternoon.

"It turns out Henderson got a package yesterday evening, after he got home. The bomb was planted against the outer wall of his office, and there was a break in the pattern. No warning phone call, and no robbery this time. It was a good thing he was at that inane press conference, or the chances are he would have been killed."

"I never thought I'd ever be thankful for Thompkins' sleep-inducing speeches," Lois said, "but I'm glad of that. Don't tell him I said so."

"Of course not," Clark said. "They also tried to get hold of Al Tamberg. He wasn't home, but Henderson ran a check for priors on him. He's clean as a whistle. Not even a traffic ticket. He rented his flat six months ago and got a job at the landscape place right afterwards. They report that he's a model employee."

"It must have been William I saw this afternoon," Lois said.

"Sounds like it," Clark said. "I'm going to keep an eye out for both of them, though, until we know for certain. Superman's going to make an early patrol this evening, by the way, because Clark Kent has plans for tonight." He raised an eyebrow at her. "I always keep my promises. And I already...um...asked."

"Clark! You didn't!"

Superman completed what he had decided would be his final pass of the evening over the city, looped around and headed for Hyperion Avenue. The sun had vanished over the horizon two hours ago, and the Man of Steel had been busy.

The bombing of the Headquarters of the Metropolis Police Department had left the city somewhat short-handed when it came to law enforcement, and Clark had made a point of making Superman's presence very visible to the citizens of Metropolis. In a period of two hours, he had stopped two muggings, one car-jacking, a convenience store holdup and a purse-snatching. Now, as he made his way home through the chilly night air of early spring, he found himself unconsciously increasing his speed. Uneasiness tugged at him, the urge to be with his wife, to protect her from the man who had already done so much damage to the city in the last couple of days.

The man--William Tamberg?--the bomber, anyway, appeared to be going after a very select set of people--those whom he apparently blamed for the ruin of William Tamberg's career and subsequent imprisonment. Raul Burma, according to Jimmy's research, had been the junior V.P. whose office Tamberg had tried to bomb seven years ago. John Grandle had been, at that time, a senior chemist, also one of Tamberg's targets. Gary Bradshaw had been a company manager, the third of his intended victims. Henderson, the detective who had arrested him, had nearly been killed today, and Lois and Perry had received threats as well. The bomber's track record wasn't very good so far, but that didn't mean he couldn't succeed.

Perry, at Superman's urging and Alice's insistence, was staying at her place for the night. The police were looking for William Tamberg and his brother Al for questioning, but the bomber was still at large, and that made Clark uneasy. He had to consciously slow his speed as the vibrations of a sonic boom rattled the windows of Metropolis's residents for the fourth time that evening.

The neighborhood was relatively quiet as he approached. The spring fog was already beginning to creep over the streets, and the air felt damp on his skin. Floating fifty feet in the air, Superman swept the area around his home with his better-than-human eyesight, looking for anything out of place.

There was a man sitting on a bench a short distance from 348 Hyperion Ave, and that man looked familiar. Superman focussed in on his face, and a moment later his boots hit the pavement beside the seated figure.

The man jumped, and then relaxed. "Superman! You scared me!"

"Sorry." Clark looked the man over. Was it William or was it Al?

There was only one way to find out.

"May I see some identification?" he asked politely.

"Sure." Tamberg withdrew a worn leather wallet from his hip pocket and flipped it open. Clark closely examined the identification card thus revealed.

"Albert Tamberg. Could I ask what you're doing in this particular neighborhood, Mr. Tamberg?"

The man nodded. "I'm...well, I'm looking for my brother."

"Would you care to explain that?"

The man sighed. "You're a friend of Clark Kent and Lois Lane, aren't you? At least that's what I've heard."

"That's correct."

"Well, they came to see me today while I was working over at Metropolis Police Headquarters--the same place that was bombed later in the day. They were looking for my brother, William..."

"I know about it," Clark said. "There's the possibility your brother might be connected to the three bombings in Metropolis in the last couple of days."

Al nodded, unhappily. Clark, listening closely to his heartbeat, could detect nothing unusual. The man was obviously upset, but not frightened. "I've been worrying about it ever since I spoke with them this morning," he said, frankly. "I love my brother, and I didn't want to believe he might backslide, but...well, then there was the explosion at Police Headquarters...It was Mr. Henderson's office that was blown up, wasn't it? That was what I heard."

"Yes, it was."

"William used to talk about him, back when the trial was still going on. He used to talk about getting even with him, and with Ms. Lane, and her editor, Mr. White. Later he said what he'd done was stupid, and...well, after the explosion today I tried to find William, but I couldn't. So I decided to come over here and sort of 'stake out' the Kents' house--in case he showed up. I don't want him to kill anyone, Superman."

"You think he might have done it?"

"I don't know," Al said. "If he didn't, then I need to help him clear his name. But if he did, then he has to be stopped before he kills someone."

"Were you anywhere near the station when the bomb went off?" Clark asked.

"No. After I finished there, I went on to my next job. Surely, you don't think I might have..."

"Ms. Lane saw someone she first thought was you among the people who were watching," Clark said. "He knocked her down and ran."

Tamberg's face paled slightly. "It must have been William," he whispered. "Ms. Lane wasn't hurt, was she?"

"Fortunately not."

"Thank God," Al said. "I want this to stop, Superman. I don't want anyone else to get hurt. If I can help in any way..."

"Well, the police would like to ask you some questions," Clark said.

"I'll be glad to answer them. What should I do?"

"If you don't object, I can take you to the 15th Street Police Station. That's their temporary headquarters, for now."

Tamberg got to his feet. "Then let's go. The sooner this is over, the better."

After dropping off Al Tamberg, Clark started for home once more. His uneasiness about Lois hadn't decreased in spite of Tamberg's attempts

to cooperate. The man had been telling the truth as far as he could tell, but all that meant was that there was another man out there who might have lethal designs on Lois. The sound of a woman's scream as he passed over Centennial Park diverted him only long enough to seize both the victim and the attempted rapist and deposit them in the hands of the nearest cop. Leaving the three of them with their mouths open, he took off again with a gust of air that blew the hat off the officer's head.

Hyperion Avenue was still quiet when he arrived once more, and he scanned his home as he always did before entering. CJ was asleep in his crib; Lois was lying in bed reading, wearing the flowing black, semi-transparent gown he had bought her when she complained that her growing belly was making it impossible to fit into her night clothing. He smiled, but continued to scan, making certain that his home was secure.

And there it was.

The bomb was nestled against the back wall of the house, right below the master bedroom, and it was counting down.

The sonic boom that marked his passage was succeeded instantly by another loud sound, the sound of an explosion, as he smothered the device with his body in the middle of their small, backyard lawn. The concussion was enough to crack the kitchen window, and certainly destroyed the peace that seemed to reign over the neighborhood. Within moments, people were boiling from homes like ants from a disturbed nest. Lois came out the back door, wrapped in his bathrobe, and stared in complete silence at the small crater that now marred the grass. Sonya and Gary Bradshaw burst from their house, and somewhere in the distance he heard the wail of a siren.

By the time the police had left, an hour later, Lois felt as if she had been through the proverbial wringer. Clark had given his statement as Superman, then vanished and reappeared as Clark, but the commotion had only barely begun to quiet down. Frightened neighbors milled around, gaping openly at the marks left by the bomb. Dogs barked, children screamed and ran about the area until Clark took over and almost ordered everyone to go home so his wife could get some rest. Sonya Bradshaw stared at the small crater with an expression of sheer disbelief.

"This is outrageous," she said, at last. "You people are a danger to the decent families in this neighborhood."

Lois felt the very thin hold on her temper snap, and quite suddenly didn't care in the least what she said. "Oh, really, Sonya? I could have sworn you and Gary got a bomb threat, too, or was that my imagination? Do you plan on moving out of the neighborhood so the decent people around here don't have to worry?"

Sonya Bradshaw's mouth dropped open. After several seconds she closed it with an effort, turned abruptly and marched back to her home, leaving Lois in possession of the field. Lois caught a glimpse of Gary Bradshaw's face as he looked after his retreating wife, and surprised a faintly malicious smile on his lips. The man gave a short

laugh and followed her without another word.

Half an hour later, in their bedroom, Lois was still seething. "The nerve of that woman! How could she say something like that? She has absolutely *no* class whatsoever!"

"Lois," Clark said, "She was upset."

"Yeah, well so am I, now!"

"Honey, she's not worth it." He put his arms around her. "Let's not waste our energy on her. I've got something else I'd much rather do to take up some time." He grinned slightly. "To tell you the truth, I think Sonya has plenty of problems of her own to deal with."

"What do you mean?"

He looked faintly guilty. "Um, before I shut down my super-hearing, I kind of caught the beginning of a fight starting up over there. It sounded like a real battle royal. I just hope they're both alive tomorrow morning."

"Really?" Suddenly she felt much better. "I guess I'm being kind of silly, aren't I."

"No, but I don't think she's worth our time. On the other hand, I know what is..."

"Tamberg was very cooperative," Henderson said. "I didn't have any real reason to hold him, so he was released. He promised to call us if he has any contact with his brother, but we've got a precautionary tail on him, just in case."

"Good idea." Superman paced Henderson's temporary office. The officer had never seen the Man of Steel quite so restless. "I'll be keeping an eye out for him as well. Count on that, Inspector. If I find anything, you'll be the first to know."

"Thanks." Henderson shifted uneasily in his desk chair. The thing just wasn't comfortable, no matter how he tried to position himself. Silently, he mourned the loss of his old chair, now a mass of carbon in the hands of the lab boys, soon to be discarded in the city dump. He owed this bomber something for that, as well.

Superman turned to leave. "I'll be in touch." He had opened the door when Henderson saw him lift his head in a way the Inspector had learned meant he was listening to some sound audible only to him. "ZalTech has had a bomb threat."

"What..."

His intercom buzzed. "Inspector," the voice on the other end said, "ZalTech Security is on the line. They've had a bomb threat."

"I'll meet you there." Superman was gone on the word.

Moving through the air toward ZalTech, Superman passed the speed of sound for the sixth time in two days, leaving cracked windows in his wake, but for all his haste, he wasn't fast enough. As he approached the building, a massive explosion blew out one wall, leaving a gaping hole three stories up and raining the area below with stone and flying glass.

He swooped down to scoop a startled woman out of the path of the falling debris and deposit her safely across the street, then he was diving into the billowing smoke that was swirling from the opening.

Quickly, he extinguished the rapidly spreading flames and cleared the room of smoke. There was no one visible in the room, but the nameplate lying in the corner told the whole story: Gary Bradshaw, Senior Vice-President.

Outside, sirens were approaching. The emergency services were getting faster with practice, he thought, grimly, and this bomber of theirs was giving them a lot of practice. It was really too bad that Superman's ethics prevented him from doing what he really wanted to do with this guy, assuming they ever managed to capture him. Tamberg was a ghost, appearing and disappearing seemingly at will, causing horrendous damage and slipping away unseen.

And who had phoned in the bomb threat?. The thought was an arresting one. Clark scooped up two office workers who had somehow been trapped on the fourth floor, flew them to safety, then floated upward, scanning the surrounding area.

Ralph's Pagoda, far down the street, had unwelcome visitors. He headed for the small establishment in a streak of red and blue. It was time for some answers.

"They're a low level street gang," Henderson was telling him a couple of hours later. Superman looked mussed and dirty, but about him was an impression of energy that had somehow been lacking earlier. The Inspector understood. This was their first real break since Tamberg--or whoever he was--had started his campaign. Henderson fully intended to use this opportunity to get some much-needed information from the men Superman had captured. "They're not talking yet, but I promised to speak to the DA about not bringing charges of terrorism against them if they'll tell us what they know, and then put them in separate cells to think it over. Somebody will talk. They've got to know something. Those robberies were too coincidental."

"I'd like to know when they do," Superman said. "You can reach me through Clark Kent, as usual."

"I will." Henderson, greatly daring, reached out to shake the Man of Steel's hand. "Thanks for everything, Superman. We couldn't have gotten everyone out of there safely without your help. We appreciate it."

Bemused, he saw a faint flush stain Superman's cheeks. Somehow, he never thought of Superman as ever being embarrassed, but apparently their alien friend was as capable of the emotion as anyone. Somehow

the realization that this all-too-human man was not human at all always startled him, even after more than five years. Briefly, he wondered why the City of Metropolis had been so fortunate that Superman had decided to make it his home. Whatever the reason, he was glad of it.

"I was happy to help, Inspector," Superman was saying. "If--when you find those two missing persons, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know--even if the news isn't good. Bradshaw is one of the Kents' neighbors."

"We will." Henderson nodded. "As soon as we know."

"Thanks." The figure in smudged red and blue left the office, and Henderson returned to his borrowed desk, wondering briefly where he was headed now. Did Superman have a real place to live? Surely he didn't spend his time just flying around the skies of Metropolis. The thought had occurred to him upon occasion. After a moment he dismissed the conjecture. He had more immediate things to do.

"Hey, Kent, where've you been?" Ralph's cheerful voice was the first one to greet Clark's ears as he stepped off the elevator into the Daily Planet newsroom.

"Working," Clark responded briefly.

"You haven't been in the office all morning! Lane's been as close-mouthed as a clam. You tie one on last night or something?"

Clark raised an eyebrow at his co-worker and went on to his desk. He had phoned in an initial report on the fire an hour ago, but Perry was going to expect more than the bare details for the afternoon edition. Ralph followed him. "So where've you been?"

"Over at the ZalTech Building, covering the news," Perry's voice said, drily. "Something I highly recommend you try, instead of badgering Clark, Ralph. Get yourself on over to the Mayor's ribbon-cutting ceremony, now. We've got a deadline."

Having to leave at one o'clock instead of staying her usual full day wasn't so bad, Lois reflected as Clark kissed her goodbye beside the elevator. To tell the absolute truth, she needed the rest. Her feet hurt, and so did her back, and the fatigue was getting to be really annoying. She could hardly wait for the burst of energy that was supposed to precede labor.

She collected CJ from day care and continued on out to the street to reclaim her Jeep from the open lot a block away. The walk was getting to be a hassle, too, but she just hadn't managed to convince herself to use the Daily Planet's underground lot again. Clark didn't see the problem, but was willing to go along with her wishes.

She glanced up at the sky. This spring rain thing was definitely getting monotonous. The prediction was for afternoon showers, and the way it was clouding up it looked as if, for once, the forecasters

were right. Oh, well, she could use the time inside to get a few things done. Maybe, this time, she could get dinner started early so Clark wouldn't have to do all of it. She might even finish organizing the last few things in the nursery, too. They were going to need it soon. Henderson had told them that the squad car covering their street had been instructed to keep an eye on their residence, and Clark would be watching, too, so she felt safe going into the house--especially after spotting a momentary flash of red and blue in the sky above her, as she parked the car in front of the brownstone.

CJ was almost ready for his nap. She settled down beside his crib and read several of the Mother Goose rhymes in the book her mother had given her for him months ago, then, after he was soundly asleep, went into the bedroom to change into jeans and a T-shirt. A glance at the clock told her it was just past two, and the bed looked very comfortable, suddenly. A short nap was just what she needed, she decided, then she would get busy on the various projects she had in mind for her time off until the baby was born.

When she woke again, it was past four-thirty. She looked drowsily at the clock, then sat up with a jolt. She had intended to start the dinner half an hour ago, to give herself plenty of time to make the inevitable mistakes, but it looked as if she was going to have to wing it. The nursery could wait until tomorrow.

The cookbook she had bought in such hope, just after she and Clark had finally gotten married, yielded a recipe. Beef brisket was one of those cuts of meat, it informed her, that needed long, slow cooking in order to tenderize it. Well, if they ate dinner about six, that should be long enough, shouldn't it? Quickly she found the Dutch oven that Clark used for pot roasts. As she was retrieving the meat from the freezer she heard CJ's voice from above, and his protest at being abandoned in his crib began to rapidly gain volume. Quickly, she dumped the meat into the pot, just covered it with water, added salt, pepper and a couple of cloved onions, plopped on the lid and turned the heat to medium. Done with that, she hurried upstairs to lift CJ from his crib.

He was wet and uncomfortable; Lois changed him and brought him down the stairs to set him on the floor in the kitchen, while she busied herself with the cleanup, then coaxed him into the den where she booted up the computer. She still had that research to do on the history of the trade negotiations now going on in New York, and she wanted to touch base with Clark to find out if there had been any new developments in the bomber case.

By some miracle, Clark was at his computer when she called. He had just taken a call from Inspector Henderson about the bombing of ZalTech that morning, and the message he gave her sent Lois into half-guilty giggles.

Gary Bradshaw and the other missing person had been found. They had turned up about an hour ago, completely unaware of the bombing. He and Talia Winthrop, his secretary, had been having an extended brunch at the local Stardust Inn, discussing, Mr. Bradshaw assured Henderson, company business while they ate. The reason for the private room was simple. The company business was fairly sensitive and they didn't wish to be overheard.

Yeah, right, Lois thought. And the tooth fairy, the Easter bunny and the Great Pumpkin had probably been right there with them. Sonya was going to have a fit. Why she had ever envied her neighbor was becoming a question she would be hard-pressed to answer.

Anyway, Clark's message concluded, he should be home in an hour or so, assuming she-knew-who didn't interfere, which just gave her time to finish her research and get started on the actual article.

It was something closer to an hour and a half later that she heard his key in the lock. Superman, she concluded, must have made a detour or two on the way.

"Lois, I'm home!" he called.

"In the den, Clark." She turned her chair around as he appeared in the doorway and tilted up her face for a kiss. "I take it Superman kept you?"

"Yeah." He shook his head. "Ever since yesterday the criminal element in Metropolis seems to think it's free-for-all time. I stopped two muggings and a jewelry store holdup just on the way home. Let me go get changed. I'll be right back."

He was gone in a blur, and then back, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and a pair of jeans. "How's the article coming?"

"I'm almost done," she said. "So what happened after Henderson called you?"

"I shudder to think," Clark said. "Gary's going to have some fast talking to do."

"I don't think any amount of fast talking is going to save him," Lois said, with a laugh.

"Probably not. Will it distract you if I turn on the news? I'd like to hear the sports report."

"Go ahead. I'll be finished in fifteen minutes."

A moment later, she heard the kitchen radio come on, and various unidentified noises told her that Clark was moving around in the kitchen. .

"Lois?" Clark was suddenly standing in the doorway, behind her.

"Yeah?" She looked up from the screen.

Clark had an expression on his face that she couldn't quite read. "Um...Could I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Um...well, I'm sure you have a good reason for it, so don't think I'm criticizing, but why are you boiling my uniform?"

"*What*?" Lois got to her feet and hurried into the kitchen. Sure enough, on the stove, boiling gently in the Dutch oven, was the Suit

and her maternity top. She stared at it in consternation, and then burst into tears. "Oh, Clark! I can't do *anything* right!"

A pair of strong arms instantly wrapped themselves around her, and she felt herself lifted as lightly as a feather. Then she was sitting in his lap, on the couch and he was cuddling her tightly against him. "Hey there." One hand came up to wipe away the tears. "Just because you made a little mistake doesn't mean you can't do *anything*, you know."

"Clark, I messed up the dinner. It's hopeless! I just can't cook!"

"Okay," he continued, smiling a little, "so cooking isn't your best skill. But you're the best reporter in the business, and the best wife, and lover and friend that I could imagine having, and you make me happy. Next to that, who cares whether or not you can cook?"

She sniffed. "Really?"

"It isn't even a contest."

She was silent for a moment, the vision of the pot's contents bubbling away still clearly in her mind's eye. "Even if I boiled your uniform?"

"Yeah, even then." He chuckled suddenly. "But I *would* like to know how it happened."

She gave a watery giggle. "I guess it *is* pretty funny, at that."

"Da!" CJ announced, clearly. He was standing next to the coffee table, one hand on it for balance. Slowly, he raised his hand from the table, eyes fixed firmly on his toes, and very carefully raised one foot clear of the rug, set it down again a bare inch forward of its last position, and stared at his parents. Then he wobbled suddenly and sat down.

Lois smothered a yawn behind her hand for about the fiftieth time since Mayor Thompkins had started his speech. Well, at least he wasn't Mayor Burns. She shook herself awake, pasted a look of interest on her features and stared in the general direction of the podium. She was never going to forgive Perry for handing her this assignment. Okay, so Ralph had fallen asleep and snored through most of the ribbon-cutting ceremony yesterday. She couldn't exactly blame the man for that, but Perry could have given this to somebody else.

Clark was off somewhere. He'd given the flying signal about half an hour before she'd had to leave for this unbelievably boring speech and she hadn't seen him since. For a moment she wondered darkly if he had known and made his escape before Perry could corral him for it, but dismissed the suspicion as unworthy of her husband.

The applause startled her awake and she joined in, then listened to the question and answer session that followed. The mayor's speech was safely on the little recorder she carried in her purse; in the

unlikely event that she needed to reference it, she had it available, but so far it appeared that she knew more about the situation than he did.

Eventually the crowd broke up and she headed back to the Jeep. As soon as she got this thing written up, she was going home. She had plenty of things to finish yet and the clock was definitely ticking. Or maybe that wasn't such a good metaphor.

"Ms. Lane?"

The voice startled her. She turned to see Al Tamberg standing beside her. He smiled cautiously. "Inspector Henderson asked me to let him know if William contacted me," he explained, "but since you're here..."

Something didn't sound right. "You've seen your brother?" she asked. "Where is he?"

"Right here." He opened his coat. Lois stared for a moment at the harness strapped to his torso, then back at his face. William Tamberg smiled at her.

"Get in the car," he said. "We're going to the Daily Planet."

"One of them finally decided it was smarter for him to talk," Henderson said. "Our boy is William Tamberg all right, and from what 'Weasel' told me the guy is completely around the bend."

Superman raised an eyebrow. "'Weasel'?" he said. "They actually *use* that nickname? I thought it was something out of old gangster movies."

Henderson snorted. "So did I. Anyway, here's the story. Tamberg and this gang had a deal. They got him his supplies and he let them know when and where he was going to use them, so they could clean out a nearby establishment. Only the leader double-crossed Tamberg. He phoned the targets and let them know there was a bomb."

"Not out of the goodness of his heart, I suspect," Superman said.

"To increase the confusion. It worked, too." Henderson shifted in his chair and finally sat up straight, deciding that the upright position was the least uncomfortable.

"Let me guess. He didn't tell them about MPD Headquarters."

"Right. He apparently talked constantly about how the other LexChem execs, and the Daily Planet, specifically Lois Lane and Perry White, had ruined his life, and about getting even with them, but when he included me in the deal the leader balked. He decided trying to kill a cop was too dangerous." Henderson scowled. "At least they aren't crazy, but Tamberg obviously is. 'Weasel' warned me that he talked about getting Lane and White--and the Daily Planet--even if he had to blow himself up, too. I figured you might be in a better position to deal with this than the police department, considering our

short-handedness right now. We'll do our best, of course, but..."

"I understand completely," Superman said. "Thanks, Inspector. I'm going to get over there now and warn Mr. White, then I'll scan the building just to be on the safe side."

"The police are looking for you," Lois said, as she turned the corner, headed toward the Daily Planet. Her voice was admirably steady, considering the fact that inside she was quaking like the proverbial bowl full of jelly. "You're not going to get away with this. Even Superman's looking for you."

Tamberg smiled again. "They haven't caught me yet. They won't, until it's much too late. You ruined my life. They all ruined my life. They have to pay."

Lois looked narrowly at him. Even identical twins had some differences, she knew, but this man...

"You're *Al*," she said.

He shook his head. "Al is asleep right now. I'm William. Al wouldn't fight back. He doesn't like the things I do."

For several seconds Lois absorbed the information in those few telling sentences. "Al thinks you're his twin brother."

"I am. How much more of a twin could I be? We even share the same body, Ms. Lane. We've been together this way since we were ten, but Al doesn't understand what happened. He doesn't remember."

"What did happen?" Lois asked.

"I don't want to talk about it. Al tried to help me. Then he was gone. Only he came back. Here." He tapped his forehead. "I can talk to him and he answers me. Only he doesn't know..." He glared at her. "Why am I telling you all this? Drive!"

Oh, boy. This guy was definitely several cents short of a dollar, Lois thought. Talk about a split personality! But one of those personalities was a killer, and she had to think of something. Think, Lane, think! How to attract Clark's attention without alerting Tamberg and triggering that bomb?

"If you do this, then you're as guilty as the people you're blaming," she said. "There are innocent people in the Daily Planet. There are *children* there. Do you want to kill them, too?"

"Children?" For a moment he looked doubtful.

"Yes, children. Not to mention this baby." She rested a hand on her middle. "And if you kill yourself, how about Al? He'll die, too."

"Shut up or I'll blow the bomb right here! I don't want to hear about it! You always ruin things!"

Lois closed her mouth. Tamberg breathed heavily several times, then continued in a more moderate tone of voice, "They're going to pay, all of them, Ms. Lane. All those people who wouldn't give me a second chance. Henderson, too. Do you want to know how I did it?"

She nodded, careful not to speak.

"Their cars. Henderson put a tail on Al and me when we left the police station yesterday. But I knew it, and this morning I got away from him. I've been very busy this morning." He chuckled softly. "Pull into the parking lot, Ms. Lane."

The parking lot for the Daily Planet employees was in the basement of the large structure, and Lois hadn't been in it for the last seven months, ever since Madeline Burns had tried to blow up her Jeep there. What was it with her, underground parking lots and bombs, she wondered irrelevantly.

Abruptly, the conversation she and Clark had had a couple of days ago about this parking lot and the Jeep came to mind, and she knew what she had to do. If Clark realized that something was wrong, then he would look for her and there would be a least a chance...

"Park there," Tamberg directed her. "Next to that van."

Meekly, she obeyed. The only possible way out of this was to use her head, she knew. In her present condition there was no chance on earth that she could outrun him...or his bomb. As she set the brake and turned off the engine, she began to open her door. The car alarm began to beep, and William' Tamberg's hand caught her wrist.

"Oh, no you don't. Slide across the seat and get out over here."

Lois shrugged and obeyed, but when the driver's door swung shut, she did not allow it to catch. Leaving her keys in the ignition, she slid across to the passenger door and got out, slamming it behind her. The Jeep's alarm continued to beep; outside the vehicle the sound was hardly audible to normal ears, but Clark might hear it and recognize it. If he did, perhaps he would find her before it was too late. If only Security didn't find it first and "fix" the problem.

Tamberg shoved her ungently toward the elevator and stabbed the button with a forefinger. A moment later the doors slid open. As he propelled her inside, a familiar voice shouted, "Hold the elevator!"

No! her mind shouted silently as Ralph crowded breathlessly through the doors.

"Hi, Lane," Ralph said, cheerfully. "Where've you been? Out on another big story?"

"You might say so." Ralph was going to make this more difficult. He was about as empathic and quick to catch on to subtlety as the traditional bull in the china shop.

"Punch for the newsroom, Ms. Lane." Tamberg glanced at Ralph. "Are you a reporter?"

Ralph preened "Yes, I am. One of the Daily Planet's best."

"That's unfortunate." The man smiled unpleasantly. "Huh?" Ralph looked at Tamberg as if he couldn't believe his ears. Lois reached out and pushed the button for the top floor, and turned back to them, blocking their view of the panel of buttons.

"Mr. Tamberg has a grudge against Daily Planet reporters," Lois heard herself saying. "He thinks we ruined his career."

"Be quiet, Ms Lane." Tamberg was watching Ralph, who appeared slightly confused by the byplay. After an uncomfortable few moments, Ralph started to edge around her to look at the buttons. Lois turned so her pregnant belly again blocked the view, but she knew what was wrong. They should have reached the newsroom by now. Somehow she had to stall for another three or four critical minutes. If Tamberg detonated his bomb on the roof, she and Ralph would certainly be killed, but the damage would be limited to the helipad and the upper floors. The newsroom, and the Daycare Center, would be unharmed.

Inspiration struck her suddenly. She grasped her abdomen and moaned, stumbling against Ralph. "Ralph! I think I'm having a contraction!"

The expression of terror on Ralph's face, the sheer, unadulterated panic, almost made her want to laugh, grim as the situation was. "What?" he squeaked.

She groaned again, as realistically as she could and grasped him by the shoulders, throwing her weight against him. "I think the baby's coming!"

"Holy..." Ralph's eyes were wide with horror. "No, Lane, you can't have that kid here! Hold on..."

And the elevator doors slid open.

In an instant, Tamberg realized what she had done. With a yell of fury, he lunged for her, and Lois brought her knee up with every ounce of her adrenalin-driven strength behind it. The man dropped without a sound, clutching his groin and Lois reached out to slam her hand onto the emergency stop.

"Come on!" she shouted at Ralph. "Run! He's the bomber!"

"Huh?" Ralph gaped at her. Lois seized his arm and pulled him after her.

Tamberg was beginning to moan and retch miserably on the floor. "I'll kill you, Lane," he managed to choke out, but Lois wasn't listening. As his hand groped under his coat, she ran clumsily toward the edge of the roof. There was no time to run down the stairs; no time for any escape but one. Clark better be close by, a detached corner of her brain observed, or it was all over.

"Help, Superman!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. And she jumped.

Clark walked into the newsroom from the stairs. Everything seemed all right; he scanned the room with his x-ray vision. He had scanned the whole building a few moments ago when he had alighted atop the Daily Planet, but the nagging feeling of something wrong was tugging at him.

"CK!" Jimmy hurried to him as he came down the ramp. "I ran that check on William Tamberg like you asked."

"Jimmy, that can wait. Have you seen Lois?"

"Huh? She went off to cover Thompkins' speech. She should be back by now."

Something was grating at the edge of his hearing; a particularly annoying sound. Jimmy claimed his attention again. "CK, you don't understand. There is **no** Al Tamberg!"

"**What*?*"

"William Tamberg was one of a set of twins Albert and William, who were born in British Columbia to an American father and a Canadian mother. They came to the United States at the age of nine, and a year later Albert Tamberg died in a swimming accident. He was apparently trying to rescue his brother, and drowned. There's **no** Albert Tamberg. Only William!"

"Oh, my God..." The sound Clark had been hearing suddenly registered, and he bolted for the stairs, leaving Jimmy with his mouth open. He was hearing the alarm on the Jeep.

Once inside the stairwell, he shifted into high speed and was in the parking lot in less than five seconds.

The Jeep was parked in the fourth row of cars, at some distance from the elevator. The driver's door was unlatched, and Lois's keys were in the ignition.

For an instant blind panic hit him. Lois would never have left the Jeep this way, which meant she was in dire trouble, and that almost certainly meant William Tamberg. Then he forced his panic down. Running around in circles, screaming, wasn't going to rescue his wife.

He listened, searching for her voice or heartbeat, any sound to give him a location. There it was. What was she doing on the roof?

And in that instant the elevator's emergency alarm went off. Lois's voice shouted something, but he wasn't listening. He was homing in on the sound with unerring accuracy. He heard her scream of "Help, Superman!" and he hurled himself through the air to catch her falling body as she leaped from the rooftop.

She had barely caught her breath as she gasped out, "Tamberg...bomb!"

In a flash, he set her down on the neighboring rooftop and returned to the Planet's roof. The sight that met his eyes stunned him for a whole five seconds.

William Tamberg lay face down in the elevator, spread-eagled and on his back Ralph knelt, pinning him to the floor. The reporter's face was white, and his breath was coming in gasps. The expression on his face when he saw Superman was almost ludicrous. "Take him!" he gasped. "He's got a bomb!"

"Lois, we have to talk."

Lois looked up at her husband's face and sighed. She'd known this was coming; her jumping off the roof of the Daily Planet had, to put it mildly, upset him.

"Clark, would you let me explain?" She was careful not to sound defensive. "Even a condemned man gets some last words."

She could see the corner of his mouth twitch the way it did when he was trying not to smile, and felt somewhat relieved. Clark wasn't really angry, but he *was* upset, and with some reason. "Okay, but this better be good."

"Come into the conference room."

She let him open the door for her and waited until it shut and he had turned the locking lever before she spoke. "I jumped because I couldn't do anything else, Clark. Tamberg was reaching for the trigger, and I knew if the bomb exploded the baby and I would both die. He was down, but not out--and I couldn't tackle him myself. The only other person there was Ralph. You didn't expect me to count on *him*, did you?"

"Well, no. He surprised me, though."

"Yeah, me too. But I decided to put my faith in you, instead. You've never failed me." She met his brown eyes squarely with her own. "And you didn't fail me this time, either."

His expression softened, but he said, "If I'd been a few seconds later noticing the car alarm I might have."

"Even then, I think you'd have gotten there in time. Of course then everyone in the newsroom might have had to be let in on the Secret." She put a hand on his arm. "Do you understand, Clark? I didn't have any real choice except the one I took."

"Yeah, I guess I do." He put his arms around her and pulled her close. "Given the situation it was reasonable. I just don't want you to have to do that too often."

"Neither do I. I don't think I've ever been so scared." She rested her head on one of his broad shoulders, and as she did she felt the baby kick her solidly in the ribs. "Ouch!"

Clark grinned. "Even I felt that. Lively little thing, isn't she?"

"Maybe it's a 'he'. CJ might like a little brother, you know."

"I don't care which it is," Clark said. "Just as long as it's healthy. I guess it won't be long now, huh?"

"Believe me, Clark, anything over the next five minutes is too long. Do you want to take me home? It's been a very long day."

The Kent living room was remarkably full that evening. Perry White and Alice, Jimmy, Lois and Clark sat watching the television as LNN trumpeted the news, with credits to the Daily Planet, of the capture of the Mad Bomber of Metropolis. The paper itself was spread out on the coffee table, showing pictures of Superman and Tamberg, Lois, and Ralph, with the byline of James Olsen beneath the photos. The headlines blared "Planet Reporters Capture Bomber!" The whole front page had been devoted to the story, including a sidebar concerning the bombs planted in the cars of Tamberg's other targets.

Perry leaned back on the sofa, one arm around his former wife's shoulders. He sighed happily. "Another Planet exclusive. The editors of every other paper in town are eatin' their hearts out." He grinned happily at his star reporters. "I was savin' this for tonight, because I wanted it to be a surprise. I'm givin' you a raise, Lois. You can use it for the weddin' present."

"That's something I've been waiting to do for a long time, Chief," Lois said. "I just hope Clark doesn't mind that I'll be making more than him."

"Not a chance." Clark surveyed her proudly. "You deserve every penny of it. What awed me is how you stalled Tamberg until you could get him somewhere he couldn't do too much damage. And Ralph, of all people, knocked him flat and sat on him. I guess there's more to him than any of us realized."

"After Lois did the hard work," Jimmy said. "Still, he helped save the day until Superman got there. Ralph's pretty proud of himself."

"He should be," Perry said. "There was plenty of heroism to go around, but I'd say the top honors go to Lois. She kept her eye on the most important thing from the start."

"Having the right priorities makes all the difference," Clark said. He caught Lois's eye. "Doesn't it, honey?"

"I guess I finally figured that out," Lois said. She reached out to take Clark's hand, then winced at the sound of raised voices from next door. Sonya and Gary had been fighting most of the evening. Lois felt sorry for the kids.

"I'll be right back," Clark said, mildly, "I'm going to close the windows in the den." He rose and left the room and a moment later Lois could hear the windows being shut. Sonya's shrill voice was cut off in mid-tirade. Perry shook his head, but said nothing.

"I think the roast should be finished by now," Clark said, as he re-entered the living room. "If everybody's ready, I'll have everything on the table in a couple of minutes."

Alice rose to her feet. "I'll help you, Clark. I'm going to have to get used to this again."

Perry watched her follow Clark into the kitchen. "Talkin' about priorities, I'm going to pay attention to them this time," he said. "It's a good thing I've got such a good example right in front of me." He gave Lois his arm as they walked slowly to the table, and once there, pulled out the chair for her. As she was arranging herself comfortably, Clark and Alice reappeared with the roast and a large bowl of potatoes. Clark caught Lois's eye as he set the platter of meat in front of his own chair, and winked.

Yep, she thought, contentedly, the right priorities made all the difference between success and failure for a lot of things. Including happiness.

She was glad she finally had hers straight.

The End.

(The sequel is "Vanishing Act".)

End
file.